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Ephesians: Are You Without Hope?

Ephesians 2:11-13

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The value of preaching verse by verse from a book like Ephesians is that the story has some continuity, that if you are here pretty much week by week, or if you are making a point to read the sermons as they are posted each week on our web page, you are living the story with me. And so far, we have seen St. Paul paint a picture of what it means to be a Christian, a follower of Jesus Christ, as he moves from verse to verse. And for many of us, we have had an opportunity to grasp what it means to be a Christian. And I guess what I want to say this morning, is that once you grasp what it means to be a Christian, you will never again be envious of anyone who is not a Christian, and you will never wish you were back in the world, and increasingly, you will not be drawn toward the outlook of the world or its pattern of life.

We know from the first verses of this chapter that Jesus called us from the place where we were, a place in the world where we were dead in trespasses and sins. We know we once followed the god of darkness and behaved according to the lusts of the flesh. We did what we thought was right but found it was constantly getting us into difficulty and destroying our humanity - and we never knew why. Paul showed us that this pattern of behavior was built-in and that there was no way for us to figure it out on our own.

And then, Christ called us. Jesus brought us out of all that misery and made us alive together with him. He raised us up with him. He sat us down in the heavenly places with him. And he gave us the Holy Spirit, who is now Emmanuel (God with us), who in turn provides us with power to do ministry.

In verses 11-13, Paul doubles back and takes up another view of our past life. He uses the contrast between Gentiles and Jews, between the uncircumcised and the circumcised. Gentiles are the uncircumcised. The Jews, in being circumcised, recognized they were a special people, belonging to God in a unique sense - the mark of circumcision was what indicated this distinction. So when Paul says the Jews were circumcised, he was symbolizing by that fact the advantages the Jew had over the Gentile. And at the same time, he was highlighting the fact that the Gentiles, the pagans, didn't have these advantages.

Circumcision is made a great deal in the Scriptures. From Abraham who circumcised his son Isaac at the request of God, it has always indicated that there were a people who had a special access to God, a special relationship to him. The Gentile world was without this. So, why do you suppose that God chose this sign, this particular symbol, and placed it upon the male sex organ? Why was this part of the body chosen to be the sign of a privileged people?

Well, I think the answer is that we human beings are basically sexual. The Scriptures teach that sex is an integral part of our humanity, that we are basically and fundamentally sexual, and that what and how we think about sex is a revelation of what we think about ourselves, our self-image, and that how we act sexually is a dead giveaway of how we see ourselves before God.

The uncircumcised, pagan world was characterized by two things. First, it was characterized by sexual immorality. The pagan Gentiles of Paul's day were highly educated, but intermingled with their civilization was terrible sexual degeneracy. If you have the chance to visit the pagan world, the ancient temples of Rome and Greece and other places, invariably you'll find tremendous emphasis upon sex symbols. Homo-sexuality was widely practiced, along with other degrading sexual practices. Temples were associated with prostitutes. It was a sexually confused age.

And the second thing that characterized the uncircumcised, pagan world was religious ignorance. They didn't know themselves because they didn't know God. The Scriptures teach us constantly that you never know yourself until you know God. It's the knowledge of God, which reveals man to himself.

Now, paganism is very much a part of our world today. Our world is characterized by sexual immorality and by religious ignorance. Perhaps it's the same in every generation but it's certainly the case in 21st century America. The one thing that can be said of all pagans, no matter what their background, is that they are "separated from Christ." If you haven't come to Christ, you are a pagan. You may have been brought up in a religious home. You may be educated and civilized. You may have been exposed to the philosophies of the world. You may be highly intelligent, very artistic, and in many ways an enjoyable and admirable person. But the one, great fact remains - you are separated from Christ. And without Christ you have no life from God. The life of God is not available to you. You may know that He exists. You may believe in Him. But until you invite Him into your life, until you ask Jesus to be your Savior and Lord, you are separated from God.

This gap between Christ and you may be small - you may be close to coming to Christ, indeed, very close. You may admire his teaching. But until you have come to know Him, until you have received Him, there is a gap, which is a death-gap, and you still remain 'dead in trespasses and sins' as Paul says in verse one (1).

The best case is that you are close to Christ. The worst case is that you are 'alienated from the commonwealth of Israel.' An alien is a stranger, a foreigner living in the midst of a country, a person without the rights of citizenship. Paul contrasts the rights of Jews with those of Gentiles. The Jews had a nation over which God ruled, and they gloried in the fact that God was the head of their nation. They had a sense of destiny, a sense of God's protection, and a sense of belonging to a single people who are all under the oversight of God. There was a sense of camaraderie, which came from belonging to God and from being his people.

But the pagans didn't know this. If they worshipped at all, it was a pantheon of gods who were as irritable and as undependable as men and women. This confused religious world in which they lived had powers that they recognized as greater than them, but in whom there was never any consistency - and never any love. So Gentiles and pagans never thought of God as loving them - and they never thought of loving God. They could only ask for kindness and mercy from their gods, and try to influence them. But there was never any sense of belonging to God.

Israel and the Jews had a way back into God's favor if they crossed over a line of disobedience. That's what Paul means when he uses the phrase 'covenants of the promise.' The covenants were the arrangements between God and his specially called people that showed them the way back. Every Jew knew that if he were burdened with guilt, troubled by having done something wrong, there was something he could do about it - he could bring a sacrifice.

But not the pagan. This is the contrast. The Gentile, the pagan, had no hope in their darkness. They belonged to their unreliable, irritable gods, and there wasn't any certainty these would ever respond to them in any way. So, when their spirits were oppressed, and they were filled with guilt and shame, and they fell into the violence, cruelty, and warfare which obsessed the pagan world, they had no promise of any help, no place they could turn, no hope in the future whatsoever, but were left strictly to their own, and alone.

There they were, as Paul says, 'having no hope, and without God in the world.' No hope in their darkness, no light. As a consequence, in the Roman world of that day, despair reigned everywhere. If you read the writings of Roman philosophers and thinkers of that day, you find always a philosophy of despair, of meaningless existence. There was no sense of purpose in life.

You might remember the comment made by the Roman governor Pilate. Jesus had stood before him and informed him that Jesus had come into the world to declare the truth. Pilate responded, 'What is truth?' There you can read the hopeless cynicism of educated Roman who had learned to despair of ever finding reality. Or you might remember the Roman proconsul on the island of Cypress, Sergius Paulus, when Paul and Barnabas came there on one of their missionary journeys. This man heard about Paul and Barnabas, sent for them, and inquired diligently of them what this teaching was regarding Jesus. He was hoping to find a way out of the hopelessness of his pagan environment.

And don't assume most of the pagans of the ancient world were in fact worshipping gods. Most were atheists. If you look out and see man alone in a cruel and heartless universe, struggling along, trying to do his best in his feeble way, in his brief stay, with nothing lying beyond, you don't tend to believe in gods. They may have gone through the forms of worshipping, just as people do today in many churches, but there was no sense of the presence of God. To them God was dead, just as He is to many in our day.

This is the situation of the ancient world. And of course it's the situation of the 21st century world too. Perhaps the only difference is that we have developed humanism and the New Age movement because we want to have happy thoughts to counterbalance the terrible reality of a life without meaning.

Paul speaks to his readers as if they understand. They were once far off, but now they have been brought near. They were once like their neighbors, without hope of any kind, but now they have a significant hope. He wants them to get this so they can be encouraged, and so they can remember each day the incredible gift of grace that has been given to them. Paul assumes that a person, to whom an incredible gift is given, will really be interested in sharing that gift with others. Is that your attitude?

But finally, I have to point out that Paul emphasizes the blood of Christ as the means by which those who were far off have been brought near. Death, of course, isn't always bloody. Yet the Scriptures speak of the death of Christ, and more often of the cross of Christ, but they speak still more often of the blood of Christ. Why this emphasis? People don't like this today. They don't want to think of the cross or the death of Jesus as being bloody. But God emphasizes it. God wants us to think about it, because blood is usually a sign of violence. The death of Jesus wasn't a simple passing away, dying of old age on a comfortable bed. It was a violent death, a bloody, gory, ugly, revolting scene - a man hanging torn and wretched upon a cross, with blood streaming down his sides and running down the cross.

Why this emphasis? Well, I believe it's because God wants us to remember that violence is the ultimate result of paganism. Cruelty arises immediately when love and truth disappear from society. And God is simply reminding us that when humanity had done its worst, had sunk to its lowest, had vented its anger in the utter wretchedness and violence and blood of the cross, his love reached down to that very place and, utilizing that violent act, to call back those who were far off and bring them near - in the blood of Christ.

And in the blood of Christ, all the advantages the Jews had were conferred upon the Gentiles. Ignorant, pagan, darkened, foolish, struggling, hopeless - nevertheless, they had just as much access to God, in the blood of Christ, as any Jew ever had with his temple, his law, his priesthood, and his sacrifice. By this the apostle Paul is trying to emphasize to us the exceedingly amazing wonder of the grace of God, which laid all these liabilities aside and reached out to us and found us just as we were, and brought us near by the blood of Jesus Christ our Lord.

Where Paul will go from here is to show us more of what it means to be a Christian, a person brought near by the blood of Christ. But that begins next time. So stay tuned.

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